

# Review of Law and Society in Contemporary Africa. R.E. Downs and S.P. Reyna, eds.

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Review of  
LAND AND SOCIETY IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICA  
R.E. Downs and S.P. Reyna, eds.

The aim of the manuscript:

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To provide a new insight into what has been termed the "agricultural crisis" in Africa, this manuscript centers around the issue of Africans' changing relations to their land. In the introduction, the editors argue that prior to the colonial period, cultural notions as to the nature of kin groups, fundamental to the organization of their society, strongly regulated many African economic activities. The incorporation of African economies into the expanding colonial empires required them to produce surpluses to supply home markets and pay taxes, sweeping away their old economies in a rising tide of commercialism in a process that continued after independence. In this process, the state inevitably plays a major role. Primarily through the evidence presented through a series of case studies, the volume aims to examine the negative consequences of this process, especially in the form of increased concentration and inequality; and to suggest the relevance of the evidence for policy.

Three initial chapters cover relevant general issues. The first, by John W. Bruce, discusses indigenous land tenure systems as they impact on land concentration. The second, by Sara Berry, examines the changing patterns of rural land control which permit concentration without necessarily involving privatization. The third looks at the concentration that has taken place in urban areas, especially since independence. The twelve case studies include two in different areas of Kenya; and one each in the widely differing countries of Tanzania, Somalia, Niger, burkina Faso, Cameroon, Mauritania, and Sao Tome.

Recommendation for publication:

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The volume does provide a timely and important collection which should be published. The scholarship is generally of a high quality. Based on original field studies made by the authors, the case studies from different parts of the continent provide very useful materials for anyone interested in understanding the issues of the changing relations of Africans to the land, particularly the increasingly important question of growing inequality. These significant issues deserve serious study, and the materials included provide useful cases that illustrate their complexity.

In general, too, the manuscript is readable and convincing. I would assume its principal audience would be university students and persons interested in development in general and Africa in particular. In the United States, presumably, courses in development at undergraduate and graduate level, as well as the growing numbers of people in the aid field and organizations and groups concerned with development policies, would provide the primary market. A market might also be available in universities in Africa, and probably in Europe and Asia. For these kinds of audiences, the general organization of the materials seems clear and appropriate.

Suggestions:

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For publication, however, I would make several suggestions.

First, and most important, it seems to me that commercialization and the changing relationships of Africans (or any other group for that matter) to the land should be seen in their larger development context. Yet the introduction of the manuscript and the individual case studies seem to perceive this as an isolated process. As a result, they tend to obscure, rather than reveal, the underlying causal factors. Thus, it almost appears as though commercialization, itself -- whether

under colonialism or after independence -- causes undesirable concentration and inequality. If this were true, the reader might justifiably conclude the "solution" would be to halt the process of commercialization. At the end of their introduction, however, the editors make the point that improved technology is necessary to increased productivity, implying the need for increased specialization and exchange, i.e., commercialization.

The question, then, is not whether commercialization should take place, but how and under what circumstances. The editors correctly emphasize that the issue is not merely technological, but requires research into all aspects of the process to determine what factors cause concentration and inequality, including the socio-economic system. I could not agree more with this conclusion. But to bring out the logic of the argument, I would suggest the need to discuss the relationship between the agricultural transformation that must take place to achieve increased productivity, and the development of more balanced, integrated national economies capable of providing increasingly productive employment opportunities and rising living standards for all their populations. Inevitably, over time, this process will lead for some (though not all) crops to economies of size and large scale farms. A decreasing percentage of the population will be able to make their living from farming, and growing numbers will require employment in other sectors, especially manufacturing and services.

While the manuscript need not deal in detail with these questions, the editors ought, in my opinion, bring to the readers' attention the fact that "commercialization" of agriculture that ignores these essential relationships, as all the case studies suggest, will likely enrich a few large farmers, linked with a growing urban elite, and impoverish the majority. The editors justifiably emphasize that the state is always and everywhere inevitably involved in the transformation process. As Saul suggests -- and the editors apparently concur -- in their intervention to "improve" agriculture, state planners need to involve peasants in a participatory process of transformation. But the editors might wish to point out that, to avoid negative consequences, policy makers need to think through how the changing relations of Africans to the land will affect and be affected by the larger process of transformation.

The editors could clarify the relation of the Africans' changing relationships to land to the larger issues of transformation in three places in the introduction. First, pp. 1 and 2 could explain why commercialization takes place and the need to understand the causes of the consequent difficulties as the basis of a solution. That is, it could point out there that the appropriate solution to the difficulties must involve a transformation that does lead to increased productive employment

opportunities and rising living standards. This would provide a criterion for evaluating the consequences of alternative policies attempted. Incidentally, it would also provide a thread to tie the Bruce, Berry and Dickerman chapters into the overall analysis. Then, on pp. 9-10, the point could be reiterated to explain why it is important to explore the changing relations of Africans to the land. On pp. 31-32, the importance of commercialization to realization of increased productivity could again be reiterated and put into the larger context.

Second, the manuscript is unnecessarily long. It could be cut through a rigorous editing that would improve its focus and make it more useful for the kinds of audiences suggested. Specifically, each of the chapters includes an introduction that generally repeats ideas that are or could be better included in the overall introduction. Where they differ in interpreting specific concepts or ideas, the editors could point out that those differences exist. Furthermore, the historical backgrounds of individual cases could be abridged, with references to other background sources emphasized. Some of the unnecessary detail actually obscures the significance of points being made and should be reduced, thus focussing the readers' attention on the critical issues.

To mention a few examples. The Shipton and Fleuret chapters, both relating to Kenya, could be significantly cut. The editors

could combine their historical backgrounds in a brief introduction, showing the similarities and differences. Rigorous editing of the case studies could then bring out the significance of the differences, including Shipton's focus on the problem of growing inequality, and Fleuret's analysis of the impact of migratory labor, especially on women. Shipton's notes could be severely reduced, where necessary referring interested readers to other sources. His conclusion, too, is unnecessarily repetitious.

Saul's paper on Burkina Faso, too, could be cut by severe editing. Incidentally, at both the beginning and the end, it would be well to re-iterate that he is writing on the pre-coup state, since, as he notes only in passing -- a reference readers may miss -- that things have changed significantly since.

Grayzel's paper on Mauritania could be shortened by cutting the 15 page introduction and focusing on the case study, showing the causes of the distorted results of the parastatal policies introduced after independence. The discussion of "solutions" unfortunately does not adequately consider the relationship of the micro-issues raised to the macro-issues of national agricultural transformation, an issue that should be raised in the introduction. Perhaps that discussion might be reduced to focus on the author's analysis of the causes of the problems in Mauritania suggests the necessity of participation by the



peasants in whatever solution is introduced.

Third, I would suggest inclusion in each chapter of maps of the particular countries and the locations of the case studies be included in every chapter, as well as a map of the full African continent showing the countries' location on it in the general introduction.

Fourth, it is a serious criticism of the manuscript that there are, as far as I can see, no African authors involved. That might have been appropriate some 25 years ago when there were no African universities and few Africans had been encouraged to conduct research relating to the kinds of issues raised. Today, this is no longer the case. The UNITAR-TWA-UNUniversity project of Samir Amin's, in Dakar, has been working with a number of African scholars examining relevant issues. The manuscript will be subject to criticism for not having included at least some. If time permits, it might be possible to ask Amin or Kwame Amoah if they can suggest someone who has undertaken a relevant study. At least, an African scholar might be asked to write an introduction to the book.